

“No pain, no gain” John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

It is such a beautiful image. Vine and its branches. And Jesus uses this image to describe His relationships with His chosen people, with us. “I am the true vine and you are the branches.”

This image highlights how intimate our relationships with our God are. Like those of the vine and the branches. The same power of life that indwells in the vine is also delivered to the branches.

In our case it is not simply a beautiful image, it is our Christian reality. You have received the same Spirit that Jesus received from the Father. The same Spirit that unites the Father and the Son, unites you with the Father and the Son.

It also means that whatever we do led by the Spirit of God, we also do in His power and together with Jesus. Whenever we bear fruit, whenever we do what our Lord expects from us, we are doing it together with Jesus, empowered by His Spirit. Our lives are synchronized with the life of Jesus.

He works through us, He is present in this world through us. How beautiful this is! What a privilege it is to be a Christian. However, not everyone appreciates this precious gift of God.

Not everyone is glad to be with Jesus and to bear much fruit for the glory of the Father. Even we from time to time can lose our sight from what is truly important and become like fruitless branches.

But God the Father cares for His vine, His Church. He desires her to prosper, and to bear much good fruit. He needs to cleanse it so that all the dead wood, all the lifeless branches are cut off and His vine is made clean and healthy.

This is, why Jesus speaks about cutting off and pruning. It seems that He is speaking about two kinds of Christians. Both kinds have been grafted into the body of Christ, both kinds are at least formally members of the Church. But there are two different ways God the Father deals with them. And I have to say that none of them is too pleasant, but one of them is very scary.

You know that for quite a while we have been worried about people leaving the church. And we should be worried. Because similarly as our Father in heaven, we too should desire everyone to come to the knowledge of the truth and to be saved. That's why it worries us when someone turns their back to Christ.

However, there is another way to look at this, the way Jesus speaks about it, and this one is much scarier. What was the Father doing with branches? Yes, He was pruning some, and cutting off others, those that didn't bear fruit.

Think about this. This is another way how to describe what is happening to our church. Looking for human perspective we could think that some people make up their minds to leave the church for they don't get their needs satisfied.

But Jesus gives us another perspective. This is the Father cutting off the dead wood, that didn't bear fruit, so that the rest of the vine can be healthy. This is scary. Those who have become complacent and indifferent to the Gospel, hearing these words of Jesus should be terrified.

This is not them proudly leaving this community that doesn't somehow please their taste, it is God the Father executing His judgment and cutting them off as fruitless branches. Then they will be gathered and burned.

What imagery is that? Gathered and burned... Jesus here speaks about the final judgment, when those who have rejected God's grace and forgiveness will be rejected and destined for eternal separation from God.

Jesus here is talking about the Hell. This is not a pleasant thing to hear. And how concerned and terrified should be anyone who doesn't bear fruit. The time of grace won't last forever. By rebelling against God and rejecting His mercy people will have chosen their fate.

But then Jesus talks about the other group of Christians. Those who bear fruit. What is God the Father doing with them? He prunes them so that they are cleansed and made more fruitful.

Here Jesus is speaking about faithful members of His body, about you. But what He says still isn't pleasant to hear. We are not spared from the cutting. When we cut ourselves or get a cut, you know how it feels. It hurts. Quite a bit.

Here Jesus speaks about the Father pruning our souls, our hearts, our minds, our very being. And as any cutting this one hurts as well. How does He do this cutting? Using His all-powerful word. When He speaks to us.

As Jesus said: "You are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." This is what the Law of God does. It cuts into those parts of our being that need to be pruned. As God speaks His law, it may cut very deep.

Sometimes it shows the things that we do wrong. Sometimes it shows what we love more than God, trust more than God, and fear to lose more than true God.

It shows our sins, that we love so much that we don't want to give them up. We want to keep them for ourselves. Innocently. But the Word cuts deep into our hearts and it may hurt.

Sometimes God's word shows us the things that we are too lazy to do. That we neglect to do, that we struggle to find time or motivation to do. We all can think of something, right? How do we feel when this happens? We feel guilty, and upset, and angered. How did you dare to say this? To me!

We may not like to read what the Lord expects from us. We may not like to hear what our pastor preaches to us. There could be things that cut deep. That hurt. That are unpleasant. So, what shall we do?

It's simple. Love it! Love and cherish those moments. Love it when the word of God cuts you deep, when it reveals to you those parts of your being and character that you don't want to change, that need to be cleansed and pruned.

Rejoice in these moments, even if you are made angry, because these are moments of God's grace. It is the Father lovingly taking care of you. Cleansing you from everything that threatens to make you a dead wood. It is the loving Father making you more fruitful.

When this happens, you know that you are still a part of the true vine, of God's Church, that you are not cut off and destined for burning. You are alive. You are with Jesus, united with Him by His Spirit. Therefore, rejoice! Love it!

Now, what are the fruits that Jesus is talking about? When we are talking about fruits people often are thinking about good works, about morally right actions that are performed living in the society.

And if that's how someone measures good fruits, then you really don't need to be a Christian to have them. What has the Divine Service or the study of the Word to do with being a good citizen and neighbour? Not much...

If this is how we measure fruits, then for sure, some Christians by name only, or non-religious people, or Hindu, or Muslims, or Sikhs can be considered very fruitful indeed. But is this the kind of fruit that Jesus had in mind?

Most certainly not. What is one of the things in this world that we can't do on our own? We can't change our ... hearts. That's right. If we are born rebellious against true God, we can't change it. Who can?

The Holy Spirit can. When He works with us together with the Word. He comes and gives us new hearts. Hearts that desire to love God and to respond to His love. Hearts that desire to trust the Father in everything.

Hearts that rejoice with divine joy when they hear Jesus speaking through His word. Hearts that long for God's presence. Hearts that want to repent and to believe in the Gospel. Hearts that desire to remain in Jesus as the branches remain in the vine.

These are the fruits that the Father is looking for. He doesn't want so much our running, He wants our loving. He doesn't want to change that much our actions, as He wants to change ourselves.

Do you remember the last week's sermon? Our beautiful Shepherd wants to make us ... yes, He wants to make us beautiful. And once He makes us beautiful, once He fills us with His love and grace and mercy, they will flow over into our lives. This is, why our fruits are first and foremost to do with our relationships with Jesus.

You probably have noticed that our average age is quite above the average age in this country. And we don't have anymore the strengths that we used to have. But we can still produce God pleasing fruits abundantly.

Every time when we gladly respond to God's invitation and as repentant sinners come to drink His grace, we bear good fruit. Every time when we receive the Holy Communion we proclaim Jesus death. We bear witness to the world.

Thus, we continue Jesus' mission. Every time when we pray, we bring all people into God's presence. Good fruit! Every time when we read and study God's word, every time when we witness with our words and action that the Triune God is the true God, we bear wonderful fruit.

Fruit that no one else can bear, but only the branches that are alive and well. There is something else about Christians bearing fruit. When the word cleanses us and makes us beautiful, we don't see our good fruits. Do you know why?

Because there is no need for us to evaluate our lives – am I good enough? Have I done enough? Have I produced good fruit? We don't need it. For you are so loved by Jesus and the Father that nothing else matters. We know that we still are sinners and will remain such till our last hour.

But we also know that we are forgiven sinners. That we are grafted into the true vine, into Jesus. That we are in Him and that He is in us. That's why our focus is not anymore of us. Am I good enough? It doesn't matter.

Our eyes are fixed on Jesus. With love and gratitude. And on our neighbours. When we can help with their needs. That's how we bear our fruit. Fruit by the definition is not something that we do for ourselves.

Fruit is something produced for the sake of others. And our fruit is produced for the glory of our Father who is in heaven. For He has chosen us, He has grafted us into Jesus, He comes and prunes us so that we bear more fruit, and He will have us with Him, when our time here is over.

This is our lesson from our today's Gospel. As beautiful as the image that Jesus uses, when He says: "I am the true vine, and you are the branches. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. And by this our Father is glorified that we bear much fruit and so prove that we are Jesus' disciples." Amen.